DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 050 634 FL 002 210

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TITLE	Why Require the Study of Foreign Languages and Literatures?
PUB DATE	71
NOTE	7p.
JOURNAL CIT	South Carolina Foreign Language Teacher; v1 n1 p8-14 Spring 1971
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Degree Requirements, Instructional Program Divisions, *Language Instruction, Literature, *Modern Languages, *Motivation, Student Interests, *Student Motivation, Student Needs

ABSTRACT

Noting that seven-eights of the world's population does not speak English, the author cites reasons for requiring that students study languages and literature. He observes that if American students are to serve in the world effectively, they must be prepared for such service. Particularly emphasized in the author's reasoning is the notion that monolinguality and monocultural isolation leads to personal underdevelopment. (RL)

From: South Carolina FL Teacher; v1 n1 p8-14
Spring 71

ED050634

Why Require the Study of Foreign Languages and Literatures?

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The enormous danger of failing to communicate, with Foreign Languages, in the modern world is illustrated by the circumstances surrounding the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There is evidence that the first atomic bombs might never have been dropped if a translator of Japanese had not erred in rendering the word *mokusatsu*, used by the Japanese cabinet in their reply to the Potsdam surrender ultimatum, which was translated "ignore" rather than correctly, "withholding comment pending decision." Thinking the Japanese had rejected the ultimatum, the Allies went ahead with nuclear bombardment. Again, many Americans were indignant after World War II when they read the mistranslation in the press that the French had "demanded" Marshall plan aid. But, what the French had done was to "ask for" (French: *demander*) aid.

A person should acquire minimal proficiency in at least one foreign language. This is essential to understanding a world in which seven–eighths of the people do not speak English. A person who knows only one language and has never experienced another cannot grasp the nature, function, and social importance of languages both English and foreign. In his ignorance, he tends to assume that all languages convey meaning in much the same way as English does. This fundamental error leads to gross misunderstandings regarding the actions, customs, and beliefs of other peoples, an ignorance the modern world can ill afford.

A cultural adjustment to a rapidly-changing world is imperative for educated men; Americans can no longer afford only the luxury of literature and civilization of a parochial or monolingual culture; they must have knowledge of foreign languages and literatures, the most direct and concrete instruments for advancing cultural adjustments and world-wide understanding.

Today the situation demands that students develop a world consciousness. The growing interdependence of the world community is an established fact. In the past, so-called grass-fire wars tended to be confined to a relatively small geographic area until they had run their

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course. Now every sizeable conflagration in any part of the world is a real or potential threat to every other part. World affairs have exploded to incredibly vast and complex dimensions. The possibility of immediate world-wide destruction is very much a reality.

The new global mobility, and instantaneous communications have resulted in the greatest interchange of people, goods and ideas in the history of the earth. With foreign languages and literatures we bridge, we penetrate from the mind and heart of one people to another, from one civilization to another, from the wisdom of one literature to that of another. There is a growing recognition of the importance and possibility of living in an International House, of the Junior Year Abroad or of a similar foreign program. To prepare for the latter, it is now widely agreed by those with most experience that initial study in the United States is twice as effective as beginning language study abroad. For one thing, beginning work is usually more efficient in American colleges, and the limited, very valuable time abroad is much more effective after a good introduction here at home.

The university student today will almost certainly travel, and many will live, abroad. Certainly most will spend more than one vacation there. Already in 1970-71, millions of students are spending from a few weeks to several months abroad during their student careers, not to speak of their later life when they will have more funds for travel.

Many times business or service will carry them to far places of the earth. Those who can communicate through another language, enrich themselves in a whole new world, they do credit to our country, they aid the cause of international understanding. Those who cannot, may suffer great traumatic experiences of inter-cultural shock through fundamental misunderstanding, and further the image of the ugly American, international ill-will and even bring on crises.

The writer G.H. Fisher, says: "The American will never really penetrate the thinking of people in a new country until he has first penetrated the language which carries, reflects, and molds the thoughts and ideas of that people."

William R. Parker, late distinguished Professor of English at Indiana University wrote that learning a Foreign Language by "acquiring even a limited skill, which may or may not be retained, the individual finds himself personally breaking the barriers of a single speech and a single culture—experiencing another culture at first-hand in the symbols through which it expresses its realities."

A. Bohlen's "Modern Humanism" makes clear that in preparing students to live in the present, certain skills and areas of knowledge must be mastered. Without these the educated man will not be able to cope with the contemporary world. If one wishes to grasp the genuine nature of a foreign people, sufficient effective contact can only be made through the most direct expression of that nature; that is, through the language.

Harold Taylor, former President of Sarah Lawrence College, recommends: ". . .a return to the concern for communication with other people in the use of foreign language in order to break through to other cultures, to penetrate the consciousness of humanity at large. . ."

Language study is an effective means not only to communication in a narrow sense, but to mutual understanding between bearers of differing cultures. It is one of the best ways of developing some degree of world perspective among students. Social studies can give knowledge about other peoples; foreign language study can lead to direct experience in another culture. We need to open a window on the world for our students, which will also serve as a mirror to understand better our own culture and subcultures.

Study of a foreign language and literature frees the student from the isolation and linguistic and cultural blindness resulting from the narrow confinement of his own language and culture. Many students report that they never understood their own language until they studied another. Study of a second language offers a practical understanding of the nature of language as such, an awareness of its power and its limitations.

Chancellor James S. Ferguson of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro at a meeting of the Faculty-Student Reviewing Committee said, "I really do put stock in the belief that one doesn't have a very thorough understanding of his own language without comparing it to another. One learns more about the whole culture if he knows the language."

Marshall J. Walker, a professor of physics, writes: "The main value to education of the study of a foreign language lies in its unique contribution to an understanding of the principles of communication of thought. A basic aim of all serious education is a comprehension of the distinction between a concept and the words or symbols used to describe (express) the concept. The person with only one language is at a hopeless disadvantage in such a task." Study of foreign languages is

needed to help him avoid semantic deception. The study of a second language is essential to understanding what language is all about. The American student can develop a clearer understanding of his native English by comparing it with a non-English communication system. The study of a language other than English offers, first, the experience of breaking the barrier of a single speech; of grasping, if only imperfectly, the sense of what it means and how it feels to organize one's whole world, from cradle to grave, in a set of symbols which are meaningless to one who knows only English. This experience, which heightens as mastery is approached, is nonetheless valid at levels far short of mastery, and in the study of ancient as well as of modern languages. It is necessary that the maximum number of Americans in these last years of the century have the maximum possible access to the symbols in which the rest of the world expresses itself—that is, to foreign language.

Literature is the highest expression of language. One does not gain perfect control of language apart from literature. Ultimately language and literature are inseparable. Each feeds upon the other. Witness the interplay of language and literature in proverbs and folktales. Moreover, literature reveals culture, and is itself in turn one of the highest expressions of culture. To deal with the rulers of the world, one of the surest paths to approach them on familiar common ground is through their literature. Neither the United States nor the United Nations can rely on the culturally uninformed to serve as ambassadors and to solve the world's problems.

In the study of literature, especially foreign literature, close analysis is made of the text. There is a long tradition of such study in the European heritage. The student is taught to see exactly what the author has said and to avoid reading his own ideas into the text. It is of utmost importance, above all in today's confused world, for every educated man to be able thus to understand precisely what has been written.

Definitions of thinking regularly connect it with language. And these two spheres have rightly been associated through the ages, for one cannot think without words (or kindred symbols, such as the numbers and letters of mathematics, which are usually abbreviations for words). But words alone do not make up language; their forms, idiomatic phrases, and constructions, are also part of language, as are the sounds and inflections.

Much is lost when foreign writings are translated into English. As Woodrow Wilson said, "Translation is the compound fracture of an idea." This is often literally (as well as stylistically and structurally) true. Native language determines to a very considerable extent how a

person views the world, and he is unaware of this mental limitation if he remains monolingual. Thus the American who grows up speaking only English is never conscious of how thoroughly his ability to think is circumscribed by the way his language compels him to structure his thought. His mind-set traps him into believing that English is the only way reality is expressed.

Foreign language study is essential to the full development of an individual's latent potentialities as a civilized human being. Every college student should move out of his one-language isolation, which tends to maintain him in his parochialism and linguistic and semantic insensitivity and dullness, into the Copernican experience of entering the multilingual world, where he learns through living these things, that one does not move from one language to another by word for word translation, but that a word of one language may be expressed by an inflection in another, or by an idiom, a prefix, etc.; in short that one moves from one whole system of expression to another, each with infinite possibilities of meaning, ranging from scientific precision, to the simplicity and beauty of a child's phrase, or the poet's creative power.

Foreign languages are essential for communicating with the world of today and tomorrow; they are indispensible for adequate knowledge of writers and thinkers of yesterday, today and tomorrow; for study of foreign languages and literatures offers the student the opportunity to improve his understanding of the world and its peoples through study of the language, literature, and civilization of a particular area of that world. In this way he moves out of monolingual and monocultural isolation, and discovers much about the nature of language, the most used tool of the mind, which is basic to all thought. The languages available are of special importance for their historical contributions and future developments.

Neither international trade nor an[illegible]ther vocational uses of foreign languages have been discussed on thes[illegible] pages, which are devoted to the general educational requirements. (But trade between the United States and foreign countries is estimated at about 50 billion dollars annually, and obviously is of great importance in contributing to the livelihood of many of our people, and other peoples of the world. Foreign languages are fundamental to communication for international trade, as well as for all aspects of international life.)

What has been summarized above has important consequences for the educational system, and lays an obligation to it. The habit of linguistic and cultural isolation which has so often characterized the American attitude generally has always had to be countered with such a

requirement. Language study is required in schools in essentially all other civilized countries, and extends over more years than in the United States. Foreign language study has therefore been required, and should still be required, both before and during college, for every baccalaureate degree program.

The typical college has required that students demonstrate a proficiency in some foreign language. This means the student has acquired: some oral facility, the ability to read narrative journalistic prose or expository writing in which the ideas are reasonably complex, and literary materials. . .the foundation for future progress in that language, and direct contact with the ways of life, the mentality and the aspirations of at least one civilization other than his own. This objective is in fact attained by students who do satisfactory or superior work in the courses in the better colleges. The desirability and necessity of the maximum possible acquisition of these skills are surely no less today than they were years ago. The reasons for requiring foreign language study are, if anything, more compelling now than then. All students must be equipped to think as clearly, as widely and deeply as possible, above all, in such times of uncertainty. Language learning is essential, basic training for such thinking. This will stand him in far better stead ultimately than will only technical or professional training. Effective training in the latter is also very important. But, it is dependent upon the former.

Although the roots of linguistic and literary training are planted in the schools, it is so important and so essential to mature, intellectual life, that it must by all means be nourished and cultivated in the university. Past trends in teaching and learning have emphasized too much the immediate practical application and usefulness of factual knowledge for limited ends. It is time that we re-orient ourselves toward placing much greater value on the understanding and resulting attitudes gained from comparing different ways of thinking–and it is here that the study of languages has its incomparable contribution to make. In a world in which "practical" achievements have largely failed humane thinking and in which an ever increasing population explosion creates an unprecedented urgency for individual communications, one can hardly afford to miss that chance. More than ever before, education must play an increased role in preparing a more open-minded way of thinking to which education means more than just professional or vocational training. General, liberating education must not be sacrificed, as important as specialization is for one's life work. Some distributional system is best for students, as they cannot really know or experience unfamiliar areas of knowledge and intellectual activity before entering into them. The distributional system should identify the major areas of human

intellectual experience and knowledge. Certainly foreign languages and literatures belong here for they are a key and means to all that is of value, and all that is necessary for the educated man, and they liberate him from the bondage of his own language and culture in the process.

The study of languages in other countries, particularly in a major power like Russia, provides an instructive contrast to the extent and importance placed on language learning in the United States. In the USSR, English is the leading foreign language and is studied by 75 per cent of all university students as part of a ten-year program of language instruction. Those interested in keeping pace with historical currents might keep their eye on such pacesetters. To keep pace with the world one must understand its language as well as it understands our own, if one is to profit from the opportunities for peaceful exchange in matters of culture, commerce, and science.

In Summary: (1) If our students are to serve in the world effectively today and tomorrow, they must be equipped for it by study of foreign languages and literatures so that they can (2) serve the national and international interest; and (3) know the world; (4) bridge between its peoples and cultures; and so that (5) they can think as clearly, widely and deeply as possible; as intellectually mature persons, who have participated in the truly liberating experience of learning another language and literature; moving out of their own monolingual and monocultural isolation and blindness.